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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 001092

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SUBJECT: DAS MARCIEL DISCUSSES REGIONAL ISSUES, BURMA, CHINA WITH PETER HO

Classified By: CDA Daniel Shields for reason 1.4(d)

1.(C) SUMMARY. Singapore's Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Peter Ho, held forth on a wide range of regional issues during his November 10 lunch with visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel. Ho described escalating tensions between Thailand and Cambodia as putting ASEAN in a difficult position, with recent developments casting a dark shadow over Japan's meeting with ASEAN members last week. He chastised Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama for continuing to lack any kind of clarity on his proposed East Asia Community, and described a growing uneasiness in China regarding renewed efforts by the United States to engage the region. DAS Marciel offered Ho a short readout of his trip to Burma November 3-5 with Assistant Secretary Campbell. End Summary.

IMPLICATIONS OF THAI-CAMBODIA ROW

¶2. (C) Ho expressed concern that the deteriorating relations between Thailand and Cambodia would reflect poorly on ASEAN. While he observed that neither side could claim innocence in their role in escalating tensions, he said that Cambodia provoked the most recent round, with Hun Sen's appointment of ousted Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra as an economic advisor. Speculating on Thaksin's motivations for cozying up to Hun Sen, Ho suggested that the most obvious justification was that Thaksin wanted to destabilize Thai Prime Minister Abhisit's government by forcing Abhisit to make a political mistake. Ho questioned whether such a move advanced Thaksin's political agenda, or if it was an act of desperation orchestrated to draw out his time in the political spotlight. It was clear the end is near for Thailand's King, Ho added, and Thaksin was cultivating a close relationship with the Crown Prince.

¶3. (C) Ho noted that when Singapore chaired ASEAN in 2007-2008, Ho had tried to establish a contact group to address the Thai-Cambodian dispute over the Preah Vihear temple complex. He stated that the Cambodians were amenable to the proposal, but that the Thais insisted the matter remain at the bilateral level. Responding to DAS Marciel's inquiry as to whether the issue would overshadow the upcoming U.S.-ASEAN Summit, Ho stated that neither the Thais nor the Cambodians would take any untoward action immediately surrounding the meeting. However, he said that the dispute clouded the ASEAN meeting with the Japanese last week, with officials from Thailand and Cambodia exchanging barely a word.

SKEPTICISM ABOUT HATOYAMA'S EAC

¶4. (C) Ho relayed that he had participated in Singapore Prime Minister Lee's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama in Tokyo in October. Ho expressed surprise that even in a closed door conversation Hatoyama could not elaborate on his concept of an East Asia Community (EAC). Hatoyama described the EAC as an open institution that did not exclude the United States, Ho stated. What perplexed Ho was Hatoyama's follow-on statement that U.S. participation in the EAC did not need to be confirmed just yet. Ho interpreted that qualifier as Hatoyama's indecision about how, or if, the United States fit in to his concept of the EAC. He guessed that Hatoyama wanted to demonstrate a strategic vision that extended beyond domestic reform in Japan. At the same time, Ho noted, it appeared that no one had told Hatoyama that the idea of an EAC was not entirely novel, and that a regional community was the underlying concept of the East Asian Summit Plus Three.

CHINA, S EVOLVING ROLE IN THE REGION

¶5. (C) Ho met with senior Chinese officials in Singapore on November 9 to discuss President Hu Jintao's upcoming visit to Singapore. During the meeting, the Chinese made an explicit point to Ho that China recognized the important role the United States played in the region, and that it was a role China respected. Nonetheless, Ho believed that continued references to the rise of China and potential negative consequences in the region (such as ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea - made Chinese officials uncomfortable. Prior to the ASEAN Plus Three

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meetings in Thailand last month, Ho stated that China demarshaled every ASEAN country, urging them not to include the South China Sea disputes on the meeting agenda. Ho stated that the Chinese made it very clear they did not want the South China Sea to be an issue addressed by ASEAN, as China viewed it as a matter for bilateral discussions.

¶6. (C) China regarded U.S. reengagement with Burma with a bit of unease as well, according to Ho. Ho viewed the U.S. review of its Burma policy, coupled with the announcement of a new Lower Mekong initiative, as causing China to sense the limits of its influence in Southeast Asia. Growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Burma and Vietnam contributed to this reaction as well, he said.

BURMA

¶7. (C) DAS Marciel recounted his November 3-5 visit to Burma with Assistant Secretary Campbell. Marciel briefly described the conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, in which she had stated her hope that ASEAN officials would meet with National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders, thereby sending the signal that ASEAN considered the NLD to be a legitimate party. Ho repeated a rumor he had heard following the ASEAN meetings in Thailand in October that Burma was considering chairing ASEAN after its elections in 2010. (Note: Burma passed on its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006, which meant that it maintained the prerogative to insert itself as chair at any point. End note.)

MALAYSIA, S TURBULENT POLITICS

¶8. (C) Running through current events among Singapore's immediate neighbors, Ho stated that Singapore was watching political developments in Malaysia very carefully. He cited the challenges facing Prime Minister Najib as a source of concern, with the political compact Najib had put in place seeming to unravel. At the same time, Ho doubted the ability

of Anwar Ibrahim's coalition to organize a unified opposition, particularly in light of Anwar's ongoing trial.

¶9. (U) DAS Marciel cleared this cable.

SHIELDS

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